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Follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons

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Report of the Secretary-General**

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* A/55/150.

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I. Introduction

1. In its resolution 54/24, the General Assembly noted with satisfaction the successful celebration of the International Year of Older Persons in 1999, the theme of which was "A society for all ages", and resolved to maintain the momentum created by the Year. In addition, in its resolution 54/262, the General Assembly decided to convene the Second World Assembly on Ageing in 2002 on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the first World Assembly on Ageing which was held in Vienna in 1982. The Second World Assembly, which will be devoted to the overall review of the outcome of the first World Assembly, as well as to the adoption of a revised plan of action and a long-term strategy on ageing, encompassing its periodic reviews, in the context of the above-mentioned theme of the Year, will be hosted by the Government of Spain in April 2002. In the above-mentioned resolutions, the General Assembly also invited broad participation in the preparatory process leading up to the Second World Assembly. Pursuant to those resolutions, the present report reviews activities and developments related to the follow-up to the Year, including initial preparations for the Second World Assembly.

II. Maintaining the momentum created by the International Year of Older Persons: advancement of a society for all ages

2. The celebration of the 1999 International Year of Older Persons produced a vast array of initiatives and events organized by Member States, the United Nations system, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations (for a summary of selected activities, see A/54/268). The General Assembly convened four plenary meetings devoted to follow-up to the Year on 4 and 5 October 1999, following the International Day of Older Persons. Sixty-four countries addressed the plenary session of the General Assembly. Member States noted that they had made extensive national efforts in support of the Year, and that the commemoration of the Year had provided a unique opportunity to evaluate the likely impact of the demographic revolution on various societies and to develop appropriate strategies and policies to meet the new challenge. Of particular importance to developing countries was the recognition of the significant growth in sheer numbers of older persons, and perhaps more strikingly of the remarkable speed with which those numbers would grow in the foreseeable future. Differences between regions in life expectancy at birth, however, were also noted. Some developing countries were experiencing, in the midst of the current era of longevity, a decline in life expectancy rather than a gain, due to the effects of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and warfare. Other notable exceptions in the global gain of longevity were some countries of the former USSR, where the recent decrease in life expectancy could be attributed to the economic and psychosocial hardship of transition from the centrally planned economies.

3. Countries expressed widespread support for the theme of the Year, "A society for all ages", which had taken its inspiration and spirit from the theme of the World Summit for Social Development held in Copenhagen in 1995, "A society for all", and had been elaborated in previous reports of the Secretary-General (see A/53/294 and A/54/268). Member States, intergovernmental organizations and international non-governmental organizations had embraced the conceptual framework developed by the programme on ageing to facilitate exploration of a society for all ages, which was built on a four-dimensional framework, comprising the situation of older persons, lifelong individual development, multigenerational relationships and the interplay between population ageing and development as described below.

Situation of older persons

4. The theme of a society for all ages implied a holistic approach to ageing, with greater emphasis on long-term opportunities and problem prevention over the life course and on large-scale social adjustments on the part of families, communities and countries. The situation of older persons, however, remained a central and immediate policy area of importance for countries. Recognition of the need to address income security and care, especially within the family's changing ability to provide support, continued as an overriding concern. Also given notable attention was the need to address the effect on older persons of the impact of the uneven gains of globalization, particularly in developing and transitional countries, and measures to reform pension schemes and welfare institutions.

5. The participation and integration of older persons in society was increasingly evident in many countries and in international debate, including the importance of bringing older persons into the development process and utilizing their productivity in ways that would benefit both older persons and society. Some countries called for concrete measures and closer recognition of the importance of older persons in more meaningful and productive capacities, including a greater participation of older persons in the political process, noting the vast diversity of older persons' contributions in different cultures and countries.

6. The issue of human rights for older persons continued to draw attention from various actors. The United Nations Principles for Older Persons (General Assembly resolution 46/91, annex) inspired some countries to address human rights, in particular in the context of the situation of older women. Although older women comprised the majority of older persons in nearly every part of the world, they continued to face special obstacles to full participation in the life of their communities and societies. Numerous actors, including international non-governmental organizations, continued to address how older women were impacted by structural inequalities, social and economic exclusion, abuse, and negative and misleading stereotypes.

Lifelong individual development

7. The second dimension of the conceptual framework — lifelong development, or development throughout the life course — advanced the importance of lifelong preparation for a successful old age, and the fulfilment of physical, social, mental and spiritual growth within an enabling environment of family, community and society. Recognition of the need for appropriate policy response throughout the life course was advanced as a humanitarian means to address the consequences of growing numbers of older persons and the unprecedented prospects of longevity. In support of that dimension, some countries expressed a life-oriented view of age that considered policies for ageing as part of an integrated whole in which lifelong preparation was fostered. Although the life course approach varied according to the aspirations and cultural context of countries, important considerations included childhood opportunities, youth awareness, mid-life education and flexible adult work opportunities.

Multigenerational relationships

8. The international community placed great emphasis on the third dimension — multigenerational relationships. Multigenerational relationships served a vital function in society at both the level of individual, family and community, and at the broader society-wide level. Countries were particularly mindful of the reciprocal importance and value of multigenerational relationships in activities and as models of strength and continuity. Significant mention was made of the overall benefits of multigenerational relationships as rewarding not only older persons themselves but also family, community, development efforts and economic arrangements within social support systems. Such concepts as intergenerational equity were becoming more familiar as demographic change was affecting family structures and solidarity among generations.

Interplay between population ageing and development

9. The fourth dimension, the interplay between population ageing and development, was mentioned throughout the debate as presenting significant challenges for Governments. Demographic projections had provided a warning and identified the need to address the impact of population ageing on sustainable economies. Although responses differed widely, countries which were already faced with pressing issues due to poverty and limited access to modern technology would undergo additional pressures on social and economic systems as their populations aged. Two recurring themes were: (a) the challenges presented by an increase in budgetary outlays for health-care systems, social security and pension payments, especially where public pensions were predominantly financed on a pay-as-you-go basis; and (b) the virtual absence of socio-economic support in rural areas of developing countries, where the majority of older persons lived. The drive to mobilize the skills and expertise of older persons and to utilize their potential as a powerful development force, especially where their increase in numbers was seen as a check on development, was gaining momentum.

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10. Evidently, the call for mainstreaming ageing into the context of global agendas is ongoing and reflects a concerted effort to move towards a holistic and equitable approach to policy integration. Overarching

issues, such as gender, sustainable development, human rights, globalization, poverty and social integration are all impacted by the ageing of populations. The concept of a society for all ages marks a turn in the tide away from viewing ageing as a narrow "added on" issue to a more integrated viewpoint of ageing as lifelong and society-wide. The Secretary-General has noted ageing has not been seen in its "revolutionary" terms — how the addition of decades to life can effect a restructuring of the entire life course — or in global terms — how the rising proportion of older persons may invite a restructuring of the socio-economic and cultural landscape (see A/54/268). The International Year of Older Persons has clearly opened doors to link the importance of policy support in two directions: throughout the life course and within the changing development landscape.

III. Sustained policy response to population and individual ageing

11. Response to challenges of population and individual ageing requires public policy interventions on a solid scientific basis. That basis is a continuum of several essential components, including the monitoring of national and global trends; the identification of emerging issues, their policy implications and pre-existing mechanisms of adjustment; and the design of a conceptual and operational framework for sustained response.

12. Research and data collection are the main tools of the above continuum, which are needed on a wider scale according to many Governments and international non-governmental organizations. Many countries have addressed the lack of both and have called for collaborative efforts to give serious attention to the need for social, economic and scientific research in light of the enormous challenges ahead. Seeking ways to achieve contributions from the private sector and more public/private partnerships and collaborative programmes is another central area of advancing ageing-related research and dialogue. The United Nations programme on ageing, together with SeniorWeb and the Institute for Applied Gerontology of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam have responded to the call for data collection, with the establishment of a database on policies and programmes on ageing, financially supported by the Government of the Netherlands. The database was launched during the thirty-eighth session of the Commission for Social Development, and lists information on policies and programmes on ageing from approximately 20 countries to date, as well as several international non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations, and it is hoped that more will respond to the request for input. Its purpose, as a valuable information and networking tool, is to facilitate policy development at the national level in response to individual and population ageing. The database can be accessed at:

www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing/ppoa.

13. In response to the call for greater research, the United Nations programme on ageing, together with the International Association of Gerontology, is continuing its elaboration of the research agenda on ageing for the twenty-first century, funded by the Government of Germany and the Novartis Foundation for Gerontology. Two expert group meetings were held in 1999, the first in Vienna and the second in New York. Preliminary reports of the two meetings, which provide a background for policy response to individual and population ageing, particularly in developing countries, are available on the ageing web site at:

www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing.

Among other things, a third meeting on the research agenda to be held in December 2000 will endeavour to identify possible research partners in order to operationalize the research agenda. The aim of the future research agenda will be to increase understanding of the new policy-related aspects of ageing in order to improve quality of later life, reduce inequalities, and ensure the sustainability of societal and human development. Underpinning that aim is the recognition of the diversity of societies at different levels of demographic and socio-economic development. The research agenda will also be a direct input to the process of revising the International Plan of Action on Ageing[1] (see paras. 19-22 below).

14. In its resolution 54/24, the General Assembly emphasized the need to address the developmental aspects of ageing, with particular attention to the situation of developing countries. In addition, in its resolution 54/262, the General Assembly stressed that the Second World Assembly should give attention, *inter alia*, to linkages between ageing and development, in particular the needs and perspectives of developing countries. In responding to these requests, the United Nations programme on ageing has directed its substantive activities towards the

exploration of policy issues of direct relevance to developing countries, including rural ageing and role of the family and community in societal adjustment to ageing.

15. Two meetings were held as follow-up to the International Year of Older Persons: an international conference on rural ageing and an expert group meeting on sustainable social structures in a society for all ages.

16. The first international conference on rural ageing, on the theme "A global challenge", was held in West Virginia in June 2000. The West Virginia University Centre on Aging organized the conference in collaboration with the United Nations programme on ageing, the World Health Organization and the International Association of Gerontology. The conference was organized in recognition of the fact that the majority of the general population, particularly the older population in developing countries, live in rural areas. The centrepiece of the conference was the 2000 forum on rural ageing. The forum consisted of a series of symposia, which aimed at identifying the implications of rural ageing for the development and implementation of public policy. The organizers of the conference are planning to produce, after obtaining broad feedback, a policy document on rural ageing to contribute to the substantive debate leading towards the Second World Assembly on Ageing.

17. The Economic Commission for Africa held an expert group meeting on sustainable social structures in a society for all ages from 2 to 5 May 2000. The United Nations programme on ageing collaborated with HelpAge International to organize the meeting, with the aim of identifying the challenges of ageing vis-à-vis family and community, suggesting public policy responses, and exchanging experiences and best practices between developed and developing countries. The Department for International Development of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland financially supported the four-day meeting. A full report of the meeting can be accessed on the ageing web site at: www.un.org/esa/socdev/ageing.

18. Highlights of the meeting involved the discussion of the assumptions made at the international level of the role of family and community in the lives of older persons. Many Governments are placing increasing emphasis and responsibility on the family and community in caring for its members. During the course of discussions, however, a key issue was raised regarding the complex nature of family, kin arrangements and community structures, emphasizing further that they should not be taken for granted by policy makers. There is a wealth of culturally appropriate examples of best practice initiatives, some supported by government but many more by civil society actors. Some of those best practices were documented by the experts in the final report. Other issues were raised, including the rights and obligations of older persons and the need to recognize the positive contributions of older persons to society.

IV. Milestone: Second World Assembly on Ageing

19. One of the most significant outcomes of the International Year of Older Persons was the decision to hold the Second World Assembly on Ageing in Madrid in April 2002, hosted by the Government of Spain (see para. 1 above). The preparatory process leading up to the Assembly has begun, at the centre of which is the revision of the International Plan of Action on Ageing and the development of a long-term strategy on ageing. The International Plan of Action on Ageing, adopted at the first World Assembly on Ageing in 1982 in Vienna, forged the groundwork on ageing issues across the last two decades of the twentieth century. In its resolution 54/24 calling for a revised plan of action, the General Assembly emphasized the need for particular attention to be paid to developing countries, where the majority of older persons reside and where demographic ageing will proceed at an unprecedented rate. Although the essence of the Plan of Action remains useful, its content and policy recommendations are in need of a fresh and updated approach to contend with today's demographic and socio-economic realities.

20. The United Nations programme on ageing has begun to facilitate the important process of bringing the Plan of Action into the twenty-first century, together with a long-term strategy on ageing. In its resolution 54/262, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to consult Governments, intergovernmental organizations and non-governmental organizations to elicit their views on progress in and obstacles to the implementation of the Plan of Action, as well as on priority issues to be addressed in a revised Plan of Action and the proposed long-term strategy. The

United Nations programme on ageing has initiated that process, beginning with the development and mailing of questionnaires to Member States, intergovernmental organizations, the United Nations system and international non-governmental organizations. An analysis of those questionnaires will be submitted to the Commission for Social Development at its thirty-ninth session.

21. In its resolution 54/262, the General Assembly also invited the Secretary-General to establish a technical committee to assist him in the formulation of proposals during the preparatory process to the Commission for Social Development, which would serve as the preparatory committee for the Second World Assembly. The Technical Committee for the Second World Assembly on Ageing is composed of experts who, serving in their personal capacity, come from a cross-section of professional and geographic backgrounds to ensure a balanced global perspective. The role of the Technical Committee is to provide advice to the United Nations Secretariat on technical issues related to the preparatory process of the Second World Assembly, in particular regarding the content of the revised Plan of Action and the proposed long-term strategy.

22. The first meeting of the Technical Committee was held in Frankfurt from 13 to 16 June 2000, with the financial support of the Government of Germany. Committee experts were asked to give their opinions on such issues as how to ensure that ageing in developing countries is fully integrated into the revised Plan of Action; the possible format of the revised Plan of Action; issues to be addressed; and implementation and monitoring, including follow-up measures. A second meeting will be hosted in the last quarter of 2000 by the Government of the Dominican Republic, with the financial support of the Government of Spain. The Government of Austria has indicated its intention to sponsor and host a third meeting in 2001.

Notes

[1] See *Report of the World Assembly on Ageing, Vienna, 26 July-6 August 1982* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.82.I.16), chap. VI, sect. A.